

Morning Discussion As a Communicative Activity

MORNING DISCUSSION (MD) IS A MODIFIED VERSION OF MORNING REPORT or Today's Report (Xie 1998). Morning Report/Today's Report (MR), as Xie describes it, is a popular 10- or 20-minute classroom activity aimed at providing opportunities for Chinese students to develop their overall English language skills. However, in attempting to implement this activity, we realized that MR usually was a one-way communication process in which one reporter read or recited news to other students, who simply sat and listened, then answered questions. The 27 students in our class, after being involved in MR for one semester, disclosed that they had exhausted their interest in it. Many students also indicated that they were nervous when standing up to talk in class and had no confidence in their ability to speak spontaneously. However, they expressed a desire to learn to use oral English to communicate. Propelled by our dissatisfaction with MR

and our wish to meet the students' needs, we modified MR, renamed it Morning Discussion, and emphasized the two-way communicative nature of the activity.

Apparently the change was successful. Here is what one student, Angie, said in her diary:*

I like morning discussion very much. It makes the class more active. Last year, we had morning reports. The reporter recited a long article or story, asked one or two questions, and most of us had no chance to show our opinions and the class was silent. But the morning discuss is different. There is more time for us to discuss, we can exchange our opinion, and everyone can participate.

Under the new MD format, the students—having browsed through newspapers or magazines for controversial issues or gripping stories—selected the MD topics themselves. We did not assign topics because of our conviction that communicative authenticity is derived from the intrinsically motivated content of communication (van Lier 1996). Under the changed format, volunteer student hosts rewrote the selected articles and presented them to the class, encouraging classmates to join the discussion.

The format and the structure of MD were not fixed, but rather developed by the students to suit the topic and their presentation preferences. Usually, after the teacher-student morning greetings, the student host would present the material he or she had prepared to ignite discussion. One common way the host did this was to tell an intriguing story, pose questions at the beginning or end for the other students to consider, then invite discussion and open debate. The discussion would take different forms. Sometimes it was an interview, with the host playing the role of a BBC or VOA reporter inviting opinions and views from the class. At other times it was a morning tea, with the host providing English riddles and enigmas for the class to crack and discuss. Occasionally a group of hosts put on a short English drama, and the class would attempt to draw a moral from it. Depending on the number of hosts and volunteers, the time allotted to MD ranged from 20 to 40 minutes out of a 100-minute period. Teachers would rarely interrupt a discussion.

Participants

The activity involved 27 freshman English majors and was conducted over a 17-week period during the academic year 2000–2001. Participating students had received 12 years of formal education before entering the university. Mandarin was their mother tongue. They had learned English grammar in high school and had a vocabulary of about 2,000 to 3,000 words. They were 19 years old, on average, and all but three of the 27 students were female. The students agreed to maintain diaries in which they indicated their perceptions of MD on a weekly basis.

Teachers' roles in MD

MD required the teachers to play multiple roles. Our first role was as negotiators. We needed to resolve questions or concerns of colleagues and students at the beginning stage, when MR was evolving into MD. During this early stage, some of our colleagues had concerns about our divergence from the department's syllabus, and some students were fearful that MD would use class time that could be better devoted to helping them prepare for written examinations. We dispelled our colleagues' concerns by stressing our legitimate need for teaching autonomy so long as the teaching was in compliance with the common goal of improving students' overall English competence. As for the students' concerns, we explained that MD was not in conflict with their preparation for examinations but rather was facilitative, since it integrated practice in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We pointed out that the use of English for listening and speaking could enhance their comprehension and reinforce the English vocabulary, grammar, and discourse on which they would be tested in written examinations. In addition, we stressed that MD would greatly expand their exposure to communicative input and make their output more communicative, which would contribute effectively to their various oral English examinations.

Once MD was on track, we also played the role of listeners and cheerleaders. We gave positive and detailed comments on the performance of both the hosts and the participants. Our sincere appreciation of their efforts to communicate boosted students' self-confidence. We deliberately kept out of students'

debates. We did so, first, to avoid giving any opinions that impressionable students would view as the “last word” (Cortazzi and Jin 1996); second, to motivate students and enhance their comprehension, clarification, and confirmation checks with each other; and third, to foster learner autonomy and thereby facilitate their learning (Cotterall 1995, 2000).

Students' perception of MD

Most of the weekly diaries showed that when MD first started, students had some reservations, reflecting their shyness about hosting MD and participating in class discussions. At first students rarely volunteered to host MD and few spoke up in discussions. When this happened, we would patiently call for volunteers to host and would encourage students to participate. However, most would look down. The long silences sometimes created an awkward classroom atmosphere. Their anxieties were expressed in their diaries:

First our English thinking is slow, the topic is over when we think well or others say what we want to say. Second we are lack of courage and afraid of mistakes. We feel ourselves inferior. (Susan)

Many students acknowledged that they were not used to speaking up in class freely for fear of making mistakes or being suspected of showing off. Eventually they agreed to take turns hosting MD, giving every student a chance to experience MD and thereby helping reduce their anxiety.

However, we soon learned that, although every student had a turn at hosting and participating in MD according to the official name-list, they did not communicate with authenticity (in van Lier's sense). That is, they did not accept MD to the extent that they engaged themselves in using English for expressing their own ideas. By and large, they were virtually forced to host, and they continued to appear reserved and nervous when it was their turn to take on that task.

When all students had finished their official MD hosting, we tried to boost their confidence and interest in volunteer hosting and class participation by encouraging them to record and reflect upon what they had experienced and achieved during MD. We developed an image of a “treasure box” to convey our appreciation of students' contributions, since they would often surprise us by bringing

to MD topics beyond those suggested by the textbook. Indeed, MD often elicited nostalgic memories and evoked heated class discussion.

After about three weeks, one student expressed a willingness to volunteer to be a morning host, saying in her diary:

Did you remember that one morning you compared our morning discussion to a treasure box? I really appreciate the comparison. It's so lovely. And really it's the most wonderful time every day. (Patty)

Finally, it seemed that after three weeks of reflection and five weeks of turn-taking, most of the students were willing to give MD a second try. One student, Lemon, wrote in her diary:

Every morning I expect the sun to set up, because I like the sunshine. It can fill my life with warmth. Just the same, the morning discussion is the sunshine of the class, it can fill our class with vital force, and so I like the morning discussion to start.

Salient features of MD

The students' diary entries reflect three salient features emerging from the practice of MD. The first is that MD creates ample opportunities for students to engage in English communication between classes, since they need to prepare for the presentations by reading widely and rewriting material. As one student said:

It's a pleasure to enjoy the everyday morning discussion. I can learn a lot from it, which brings knowledge and entertainment for us. I'm very interested in MD and through it, my English level is being improved. My classmates and I make good preparation for it. (Cindy)

A similar process of cognitive engagement takes place when students listen to and participate in the discussions. Here is Angie's comment:

MD can improve our express ability and speaking skills. We must organize our sentences well within several minutes and show our opinions simply. Also it can evoke our participate spirit. Personally, this point is the most important one for me, it makes me more active in class.

For the first time in their learning, the students became users of the language instead of passive learners. This change of status greatly enhanced their sense of achievement, which had the cumulative effect of promoting communication.

The second feature of MD lies in the

authenticity of students' communication. Being authentic in communication, according to van Lier (1996, 1998), entails a process of engagement with such characteristics as self-determination, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation to communicate in MD was largely induced from the students' interest in the topics they chose for discussion, which covered social, cultural, ethical, educational, familial, and emotional issues. Other topics discussed included science and technology, business English, events in other parts of the world, music, literature and arts, public relations, etiquette, Chinese history and geography, love of nature, environmental protection, sports and sportsmanship, movies and stars, the fun of living, and problems in daily life. All these topics were closely related to students' daily life, and their reflections on these issues would function as orientations for their life outside the university. (A list of some MD topics is provided in the appendix.) As Shirley wrote in her diary:

MD provides us with the sense that we are the hosts of the class. We choose topics ourselves, we talk whatever we are interested in, and our teachers just sit down and listen. I think it can make us more confident than before.

We provided the students with guidelines for using available English resources for their MD preparations and encouraged them to work together. When listening to BBC or VOA programs, for example, students were encouraged to collaborate with their roommates to gain understanding of the gist of the broadcast. When searching the university library and the Internet, they were encouraged to exchange topics for cross-references. When they were perplexed by the large amount of unfamiliar vocabulary, we encouraged them to work together consulting a dictionary and teaching each other the meanings of the words.

Authenticity is also related to providing appropriate responses, making a commitment to understanding, and developing a sense of purpose for the communication. MD thus was designed to encourage students to set up their own communications agenda by taking responsibility for when and how they would host and their degree of participation in discussions. We avoided forcing unprepared students to host or participate, preferring to allow their peers to influence them. Tony's diary entry suggests that

a legitimate degree of learner autonomy can accelerate authentic communication:

I am very poor in our class. Sometimes I really want to say something in English or get the main idea of what others say, but I can't. I always admire other students because they can speak fluently and freely. At that time I think why they do it so well. Actually I also can. I can't be dropped by others. As soon as I join them, I could catch up with them. (Tony)

The third feature of MD is that it helps encourage a relaxing classroom atmosphere, thereby lessening students' anxiety when they use English for communication. We emphasized that no one would be laughed at in class or be interrupted for pronunciation or grammar correction. Angie expressed the benefits of such an approach:

First, it [MD] makes me more active; I didn't dare to speak in public before, because I was not very confident, I was afraid that others laugh at me. As a result, I lost chance and become more and more silent. But I've changed my opinion since I participated in our morning discussion. I found nobody laughs at me, and others accept my opinions. I was very happy and become more and more confident. Now, I dare to speak even if I can't speak very well, I speak in our morning discussion and I also go to English Corner. I can practise more.

Communication strategies, such as comprehension checks, were achieved through the hosts checking a prepared list of vocabulary with the rest of the class. Clarification requests, such as asking for repetitions and explanations, were more likely to occur from students than from teacher-fronted classroom teaching. When some students asked for clarification, the hosts could invite other students to give an answer, which functioned as a disguised form of confirmation for the students. MD naturally developed a micro-classroom context in which students felt free to communicate their thoughts with their peers.

It [MD] has improved my courage and made me be active. Last term, as long as I put up my hands, I felt very nervous and my heart could be beating very fast. I couldn't say anything at that time. But now I feel very free and I'm glad to put up

my hands to show my opinion. I think this is the result of long time practice. So I am grateful for our morning discussion to give me the chance practicing myself. (Tony)

The arrangement of desks and chairs was fully at the students' disposal to suit the theme of the discussion. Sometimes desks and chairs were set up in a circle for the morning tea and interviews, or all desks were moved to the corridor to give room for a stage drama, with the student audience sitting at the back. If the host preferred to come to the front to address the class, the classroom remained as it normally was. The notion behind the free arrangement of the classroom was that students not only could enjoy the convenient format but could also gain a sense of ownership, so that they could feel at home when hosting and participating in MD.

Our MD has become more and more wonderful. We all like it very much. Each of us is very proud of our own program which just like our own baby, we give birth to it, animate it, take care of it, develop it, put fresh air in it, make it more colourful and wonderful. (Rose)

Conclusion

English teaching in Mainland China has long been viewed as insufficiently communicative (see, for example, Hird 1995 and Leng 1997), and students there are thought to lack communicative competence. MD is an attempt to overcome some culture-specific constraints affecting communicative competence, such as teacher dominance and students' uncritical acceptance of teachers' lecture contents. MD creates opportunities for students to communicate using a variety of strategies. Students' own perceptions of MD have convinced us that a carefully designed class activity could meet their needs, motivate them to be responsible for their own learning, and enhance their interest in authentic communication.

The successful implementation of MD—despite some difficulties that teachers and students may experience at the initial stage of any innovative activity—implies that teachers' encouragement and students' awareness of the activity are likely to contribute to overcoming the difficulties. By keeping diaries, students increase their awareness of the value of MD, and teacher-student negotiations provide students with opportunities to set their own communicative goals, regulate their own

learning process, and undertake learning initiatives appropriate to their own style. By encouraging such learning autonomy, teachers support authentic communication, spur curiosity about the unknown, and inspire self-confidence among their students.

*Note:

All student diary excerpts maintain the original language. Students' "English names" are used with the students' permission.

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APPENDIX | TOPICS FOR MORNING DISCUSSION

Morning Discussion as a Communicative Activity • *Leng Hui, Jiang Xin, and Jiang Yi*

Activities in our university

“A noisy bird that is shot first”

Computers and human brains

DINK (Double Income No Kids) families

Favorite jobs

Favorite books

Food we like: Genetically modified?

Given a choice, would you prefer health, money, or intelligence?

Going abroad

KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) in China

Made in China

Meeting Internet friends

Nature of happiness

Nature of love

Strategies for dealing with exams

Talking about your idol

Travel to the Moon

Whom do you respect more: Lei Feng or Bill Gates?

White lies